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ABSTRACT

Since the inaugural meeting of the Southeastern Association of Community College Research in 1975, the research conducted at community colleges, as well as the issues facing researchers, have remained fairly constant. Research has been consistently understaffed and the themes of research have tended to focus on relating student progress to placement, surveying local communities, reviewing programs, and conducting student follow-ups. Moreover, the general purposes for conducting institutional research have remained constant in that the first purpose is still public relations. The need to satisfy external agencies has caused the colleges to value anything that makes the school look good and to avoid anything that casts a negative light on the institution. Institutional researchers must also contend with the need for educators to believe what they want to believe. An example of this is the frequently reported study showing that problems with students in the 1990s have profoundly worsened since the 1940s. Even after the study was found to be a hoax, it was continually repeated. Finally, in approaching their task, institutional researchers should consider the following points: (1) make sure that data is readily understandable; (2) understand public relations; (3) employ valid methodology; (4) study important questions; (5) perform repeat studies; (6) make use of external resources; (7) include only the data that is relevant to the research topic; and (8) understand the resistance to outcomes data in higher education. (HAA)

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Trends in Institutional Research

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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"Trends in Institutional Research"
Presentation to Annual Meeting
of Southeastern Association of Community College Research
Panama City, Florida
August 6, 1996
Arthur M. Cohen

The Southeastern Association of Community College Researchers is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Starting in 1981 as a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association, by 1975 it had taken on its current identity. I was at its inaugural meeting in Boone, North Carolina that year and recall interacting with the founding members. In the ensuing years I have had many associations with the group because I am the director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, the national repository for institutional research reports.

ERIC exists to serve you. It provides several supportive activities: it is a source for research topics, designs, formats, and questions; it provides a critical review of research reports that are sent in for potential entry into the database; it assists researchers in writing for publication in any of the journals directed to a community college audience; it provides an archive in which researchers may store their reports; and it maintains mailing lists of people who are working on various research projects not only in the community colleges but also in other institutions and agencies that have some interest in community college studies.

Since the inaugural meeting of SACCR in 1975 numerous research reports have come into the ERIC Clearinghouse. Many were written by members of this group and others by researchers elsewhere. In reviewing the studies done then and more recently

some patterns come to light. First, institutional research in the community colleges of the nation is as understaffed now as it was 21 years ago. Nationwide the colleges average around two-thirds of an FTE in the research office. Second, the number of studies emanating from the colleges each year has remained the same. Few new colleges have been built and few have merged or closed. Third, the themes of institutional research have not changed much. The studies center on relating student progress to placement procedures and other variables; surveying the local community together; public perceptions of the college; relating student aspiration to curriculum; reviewing programs; running comparative studies between the home institution and others, usually in the same state; and conducting student follow-up and other types of attainment studies.

A few things have changed. More college staff members are writing research reports. The faculty, the public information director, assistants to the presidents, student services staff, program heads, all may be involved in collecting data, running surveys, and issuing papers. Frequently, the IR director is not consulted regarding study design and may not even know of the report until after it has been issued. And second, extramural agencies are issuing more demands for data. State agencies have become more prominent in requesting information from the colleges.

In general though, the purposes for institutional research have remained constant. The first purpose is still public relations. The research reports form the basis for perceptions of the college that are held by members of the public, neighboring institutions, and state officials. The need to satisfy external agencies has gained ground as more state agencies have mandated that certain data be provided. Far down the list but still worth

mentioning as a purpose are the studies that advise program managers on the value of their student selection procedures, curriculum, and instructional forms.

Nonetheless, the IR directors are aware that their emanations are not the only influences on college procedures or public perceptions. Public information officials are fond of putting out reports about student idiosyncrasies; a student winning an award may be worthy of a major release. Administrators will frequently make addresses to the college or to the surrounding community based on little or no data or simply on an article that they read. The heads of college services such as the bookstore or the cafeteria may do their own surveys, catching every Nth person who walks in and asking them how they like the service. A program head may survey program graduates asking if they are working in the field or whether they have any reactions to the education they received. Any of these investigators may use ambiguous questions, poor if any sampling procedures, and may draw conclusions that may or may not be based on the data. Even so the reports may be treated with as much respect as those prepared by the IR office in which definition of the universe, population sampling, question validation, and appropriate statistics are the tools of the trade.

However, this is the milieu in which the IR director functions. The college is dependent on the support of its constituency and funding agencies. Therefore, anything that makes the college look good is valued whereas anything that casts the institution in a negative light is understandably avoided. Sometimes the IR staff gets caught in this need to provide a steady stream of good news. As example of the need for a consistent stream of positive information is provided in reaction to the Transfer Assembly, a project that the Center for the Study of Community Colleges has been operating for seven years. The

Center developed a definition of transfer rate that is valid, based on available data, and readily understandable: all students entering a community college in the fall of a given year, who complete at least twelve credits at the institution, divided into the number of that group who matriculate at an in-state public university within four years. Data are collected according to that definition from between 15 and 20 states each year. The national transfer rate has been holding consistently at around 20% to 22%. California's transfer rate has been hovering between 17% to 19%, consistently lower than the national norm. This causes some concern among community college administrators and researchers in the state who have acted to shift the focus. First they developed a different definition of transfer, computing the transfer rate as the number of students who left the institution in good standing in the spring of a given year and did not return in the fall; the assumption was that the students might be enrolled elsewhere or at least satisfied with their community college experience. A couple of years later they abandoned that and defined transfer not in terms of a student's action but in terms of whether the college had made students "ready" for transfer, with transfer readiness defined as the number of students who successfully completed the introductory sequence in college level English and math, with the assumption that these students were thereby eligible for transfer; whether they matriculated at a university or not was irrelevant. All of this distortion just as a way of getting out from under the fact that transfer rates in California are slightly below the national average.

The institutional researchers also have to contend with the need for educators to believe what they want to believe. A wondrous example of the need to the believe is the frequently reported study showing that in the 1940s the major problems with students in

the schools were gum-chewing, hair pulling, and running in the corridors whereas in the 1980s the major problems were drug use, guns on campus, and pregnancy. The New York Times Magazine carried a report showing this study to be a hoax, that the information about the 1940s was taken from a survey form that someone was sending to school teachers, the information from the 1980s from a focus group of school principals. The report even traced the hoax to the person who initiated it. That should have laid the matter to rest but because school people want to think that their problems now are considerably worse than they were two generations ago, they repeat the story.

Another example of believing what we want to believe is revealed in the contention that bachelor's degree holders were shut out of California community colleges because of a fee increase. Around four years ago the legislature mandated that anyone already in possession of bachelor's degree would have to pay $50 per unit to enroll in a community college class whereas people without degrees would pay the standard fee of $13 per unit. The college administrators pointed to a sudden drop in enrollments of bachelor's degree holders which contributed to a shortfall of 140,000 students in California the year that the extra fee was put in place. However: the students knew that if they checked the "bachelor's or higher" box on the line asking for prior attainment, they would pay $50 a unit whereas if they did not check the box their class would cost $13 per unit. Not surprisingly the number of bachelor's degree holders dropped noticeably. But the colleges do not verify prior school attainment and the belief that bachelor's degree holders were being shut out, trumpeted repeatedly by the community college spokespersons carried the day. The extra fee was remanded three years after it was installed. I think that the

proportion of bachelor's degree holders has since increased significantly among California community college students.

These anecdotes about the need to believe would be only a curiosity except that they suggest a way of looking at some of the current beliefs. One is that a tidal wave of students will inundate the colleges over the next 5-10 years. This belief is based on data showing that the number of 18 year olds in the United States will increase notably. And certainly the population count is going up such that by 2005 the number of 18 year olds will almost be as high as is was in 1979. Therefore, the reasoning goes, the colleges will need additional staff and buildings or, if funds are not forthcoming, students will have to be diverted to distance learning activities. However, space utilization studies can reveal the extent to which this is true. It may just be that there is a considerable amount of slack in the system, that scheduling classes more widely throughout the day and the week, establishing a year round calendar, and reconfiguring some of the buildings can make room for many more students. A study done at Gaston College and reported here provides an example. However, the will to believe the colleges must find more resources is pervasive.

Another example of the will to believe is provided in the numerous reports showing that community college matriculants are less likely to receive baccalaureate degrees than are those students who start as freshmen in a senior institution. Pascarella and Terenzini reviewed numerous studies and found most showing that only a small percentage of variance in bachelor degree attainment related to the institution where the student began. Moreover, for most students, the choice is not between the local community college and the freshman class at a university; it is between the community

college and no collegiate experience. College leaders should be trumpeting the fact that 1.25 million students enter the community colleges of the nation each year and that four years later 250,000 of them are in baccalaureate-granting institutions; in sum, a quarter million potential bachelor's degree recipients who, absent the community college, might not be in the higher education system at all. Instead of that, many higher education spokespersons and legislators seize on the lower rate of bachelor's attainment and draw inferences about the poor quality of education that community college students receive. They have to believe that their alma mater provided a better experience.

These issues of the need to believe affect the conduct of institutional research. In community surveys for example, questions about whether the public thinks the college is doing well and whether they would like to take courses there are less a matter of potential student interest than they are public relations. College managers have to believe that the public thinks highly of their institution and the IR officer who insists on using validated questions, careful population sampling, non-respondent bias check, and similar research techniques may be swimming upstream against a strong current.

The IR directors must also take note that the audience for their reports is not as sophisticated in research techniques as they are. Avoid displaying elaborate statistical manipulations and second and third-level analysis of marginally relevant data. A petitioner deserves straightforward answers to the questions, "How many of your students transfer?" or "How many of your students gain employment?" IR must respond with a number derived from a valid, readily understandable definition for which data can be obtained. Granted that all sorts of influences not within the college's ability to control affect the numbers and that no one number provides a complete picture. Legislators, newspaper

reporters, and few practitioners care to concern themselves with all the reasons or with all the ways of partitioning the data. The audience for the college's releases is not the same as a set of research-journal readers. One page is usually enough to report findings.

Within the broader context of institutional research it is necessary to build a constituency. The numerous other college staff members who are conducting studies of their own may welcome coordination and advice, provided that they understand it. Multivariate analysis is anathema to the history instructors and the psychology instructors really don't need to know that among their students who transferred, the Middle Eastern immigrant women aged 45 to 50 with three or more children and a household income of $25,000 to $29,000 most appreciated their classes.

Cooperative ventures are a way of magnifying influence. Nancy Mattice, IR director at College of the Canyons (CA) helps the English instructors conduct studies of student writing. The faculty receive more reliable data and she gains a receptive audience for her reports. Similarly the IR directors who conduct studies in concert with their counterparts at other colleges, asking the same questions of populations sampled in the same way, are able to compare the outcomes of college activities in a way not otherwise possible.

In summation:

- Keep it simple. Don't be surprised that few people are interested in all possible permutations and sub-categories of your data. Readily understandable information should be the goal. Apply the test, "Would a reasonably literate lay person want to know this?" "Would a one-page summary be intelligible?"

- Understand public relations. The college trustees and administrators have to sustain a flow of good news about the college; it's their job. Hence, studies that yield positive findings are valued while anything showing poor results will be submerged unless it can be used to justify additional funding.

- Do it right. Use best principles of research design: population sampling; non-respondent bias check; validated questions. It's no more difficult and it lends credibility to your findings.

- Study important questions. Comparing the ethnic and gender composition of students who take classes at 8:00 am with those who take classes at 9:00 am is just not very useful, whereas analyzing the reasons why some categories of students will not take classes at night might inform decisions about campus security.

- Do repeat studies. Time-series designs that report the same information about the college outcomes year after year can reveal the effects of program changes.

- Exploit your counterparts. The ERIC files include hundreds of IR studies complete with survey forms, and your consortia provide a network for learning which questions and methods have proved most efficient in gaining useful information.

- Leave some data on the table. If you just set out to compare the effects of different instructional treatments don't subdivide the report by student age, gender, ethnicity, SES, and aspirations. Yes, those data are readily available. No, they don't contribute to knowledge about instruction; more likely they divert attention from the central findings.

- Know that your audience fears product information. For decades the colleges have received their funding on formulas related to student attendance and the staff have judged the institution on the basis of its efforts. Higher education has no tradition of demonstrating results. Therefore the requests for data on outcomes have been shunned, ignored , or responded to with clouds of caveats. Eventually, state-level demands such as those recently mandated in Florida and Texas may modify the process bias but for now it's in the air you breath. Be kind to your colleagues.